

San Clemente Historical Society

"Forward with the Dream"

NEWSLETTER OF THE SAN CLEMENTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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OUR CITY'S AUTHENTIC BRAND: SAN CLEMENTE, "THE SPANISH VILLAGE BY THE SEA".

by Mike Cotter, Vice President

Do you remember the first time you ever set foot on San Clemente's Avenida Del Mar? The authentic patina of downtown's old Spanish architecture, the quaint, small town feel of the village shops, the slope of the sidewalk gently ushering you down to the sea in the distance?

And how about your first view - through the palm trees - of the wooden pier and breaking waves on a sandy beach, as you walked or drove down toward the ocean?

If you've forgotten, spend a couple of minutes watching first-timers as they slowly cruise down toward the Pier Bowl. They are the thrilled ones quietly mouthing the words, "Oh my God..."

But maybe your first glimpse of San Clemente was a few years ago, and now it's easy to take things for granted - even fabulous things like San Clemente, "the Spanish Village by the Sea."



Imagine that!

In 1925 town founder Ole Hanson set out to build a village "in the manner of Old Spain." Hanson insisted that all buildings, whether commercial or residential, be of "Spanish type" - a style which later came to be known as Spanish Colonial Revival.

This architecture became popular in the early 20th century as architects went looking for a style that said "Southern California" - a style that honored the area's Spanish colonial history, that worked in a subtropical climate, that was different from



1982: Generic facades turned downtown into a ghost town.

any east coast style.

Hanson's Spanish Village vision was a resounding success. By 1930, San Clemente was the wealthiest per capita City in the U.S. Even a 1932 Ripley's Believe It or Not article startled readers with the headline, "There is a SPANISH CITY in the U.S.A.!"

But over the decades, San Clemente has taken for granted and at times rejected its "Spanish Village" soul. Hanson's Spanish architecture was abandoned in the Great Depression. In the 1960s and 70s, majestic bluff-side red-tiled mansions were torn down in favor of nondescript high rise condos. Beige facades appeared on historic downtown buildings. The new branding went from totally unique to generic. One of our lame slogans was, "where it's fun to be alive." Another was "the good times come in waves." Pathetic.

And generic didn't work. The accompanying picture of San Clemente in 1982 shows the desolation of a façade town without a soul - dull, empty, lifeless.

Fortunately, a few short years ago the City woke up and established an Architectural Overlay District for the historic downtown area which promotes historical preservation and encourages new construction to be Spanish Colonial. Quoting from the city's web site:

"Today, the Spanish Village by the Sea is more heterogeneous than Hanson had envisioned, but historic homeowners and current planning and development all reflect increasing esteem for his red-roofed,

white-walled Spanish architecture dream.

As San Clemente grows, people increasingly look to the past to anchor their sense of local identity.

Historic homeowners must abide by city codes that protect the aesthetic spirit and style of early San Clemente. New development east of the 5 freeway now elevates Spanish Colonial Revival architecture to new interpretations, incorporating red roofs, balconies, and promenades as the demographics of San Clemente shift and new residents are drawn to the Mediterranean charm of this community. City development officials have leveraged new growth to funnel money into programs that reinvigorate and restore the historic downtown."

This decision to rehabilitate and celebrate our Spanish Village by the Sea heritage has paid off with the vibrant, quaint, cohesive and genuine "real town" experience visitors now get when they visit downtown and the beach.

I wrote in this space over three years ago:

"Going forward, we can either embrace our downtown Spanish Village heritage, or we can reject it. From an economic point of view, what downtown has right now is a marketer's dream come true: A legitimate heritage with real charm literally oozing from its genuine 80-year-old patina. Downtown San Clemente has been studied by many cities nationwide for its "ideal downtown experience."

Today's shopping center developers

spend many millions of dollars trying to recreate the exact atmosphere that too many of us take for granted.

Marketing experts would advise that throwing away what's unique about the downtown San Clemente experience would be shortsighted and dim-witted on a grand scale."

Let's not take our town's heritage and genuine branding for granted. We're not just a generic "village" - we're "the Spanish Village by the Sea"! There are hundreds of so called "villages" just in California. But there is no other authentic "Spanish Village" in the entire United States.

"Spanish Village by the Sea" is such romantic, passionate and powerful branding! Imagine the possibilities. A red cape perhaps....

Let's embrace and enhance our "Spanish Village by the Sea" brand. Let's encourage Spanish style "tapas" appetizer menus in restaurants. Let's teach Flamenco dancing, not just the tango, at the community center. Let's have a Spanish dress up contest at the next Fiesta. How about a Spanish "paella" cook-off? Let's have Spanish carriage rides around town. Let's have an Ernest Hemingway festival, I don't know...

And let's not make the mistake of going generic (ugh!) ever again. ☺

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Historical Society**
(a non-profit corporation)

Check out our new website:
sanclementehistoricalsociety.org

Your support of the Historical Society will make it possible to continue our efforts to save, promote and create an awareness of San Clemente's unique history.

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Research Museum & Store

Our research and museum facilities are temporarily in storage. To purchase the Society's Museum Store line of historical photos, visit our exclusive distributor, the San Clemente Art Supply at 1531 N. El Camino Real, San Clemente.